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THE PSYCHOLOGY OF MILITARY MASSACRE
Nanking, My Lai, and the Concept of Individual Responsibility in the Midst of Organized Slaughter

Kan vi altid kræve, at individer skal vise socialt ansvar? Er dette et realistisk krav også i de mest ekstreme situationer, som fx ved militære massakrer? To militære massakrer udforskes her i et forsøg på at opdage, hvordan mennesker faktisk handler i disse situationer. Det er tydeligt, at evnen til at tage socialt ansvar ikke tilhører en bestemt personlighed. Der er nærmere tale om, hvordan sociale kontekster reducerer de oprindelige moralske begrænsninger, som eksisterer i forhold til voldsudøvelse. Denne reduktion sker først ved, at det militære system skaber en kontekst, hvor volden opfattes som noget, der er formelt autoriseret og derfor moralsk forsvarligt. Gerningsmanden føler sig uden personligt ansvar. Inden for dette system vænner han sig gradvist til voldsbrug og indoktrineres samtidigt i værdien af lydighed. Derefter præsenteres soldaten for et dehumaniseret billede af de kommende ofre som »fjenden«. Det militære massemord på civile bliver en reel mulighed. Men selv i denne ekstreme situation er der mennesker, som nægter at adlyde ordrer og som insisterer på at følge deres samvittighed. Det er disse individer, som danner grundlaget for det juridiske krav om ansvarlighed – og det moralske håb om, at det er muligt at forandre systemet og verden til noget bedre og mindre destruktivt.

»War is so awful that it makes us cynical about the possibility of restraint.« – Michael Walzer[1]

»The character of battle is slaughter, and its price is blood.« – Carl Von Clausewitz[2]

Last year it happened again. American soldiers massacred non-combatants. On November 19, 2005, a small group of US Marines entered civilian homes with the intention of killing their inhabitants. This time the place was

1 Walzer, 1977, p. 46.
2 Cf. Howard, 2002, p. 48.

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Haditha in western Iraq, described by the *New York Times* as a »lawless, insurgent-plagued city deep in Sunni-dominated Anbar Province« (Shanker et al., 2006). It seems that the sweep may have lasted from three to five hours, and that the marines methodically murdered twenty-four people – including women and children – as revenge for a roadside bombing which killed one of their soldiers.

The father of the US sergeant who led the squad of marines recently stated that his son joined the marines »because he wanted to play the trumpet in the band, not to kill people« (Baxter, 2006). He prays for the clearance of his son's name, for he cannot believe that his own child could do such a thing. It remains to be seen whether this hope is well-placed and realistic. If we assume, however, that Sergeant Frank Wuterich is indeed guilty of the charges, this would not constitute anything novel in the history of US warfare. The details of what happened in Haditha still remain sketchy – recently there have been rumors of a cover-up – but the associations they provoke are crystal clear. A war has turned ugly, soldiers are dying and their comrades are getting frustrated and angry. There are echoes of My Lai in the articles on Haditha. The scale is smaller, but the dynamics of military mass murder remain depressingly familiar. As major combat operations »ended« in Iraq, the enemy disappeared from view and transformed into a less tangible entity, hidden among the population. There is talk of children throwing bombs at Americans or carrying weapons for the rebels. The line between civilian and combatant is getting blurred, just as it was in Vietnam.

Haditha was preceded by an attack killing a soldier; My Lai followed shortly after its perpetrators had made it out of a mine field that killed and maimed several members of their company. Anger, confusion, and fear mix with a dehumanized and generalized contempt for the enemy. Within a context that authorizes and encourages the use of force, the stage is set for disaster.

In the next section, I will describe how two such instances of large-scale military mass murder unfolded. These case studies are useful, because they highlight the similarities inherent in military massacres. As historical occurrences, there are obviously several variations between them. The perpetrators came from different cultures – Japanese and American – and so did the victims, who were Chinese and Vietnamese. The scales of the killing are also completely different. But yet there remain many important commonalities, and it is from an examination of these that we can draw some conclusions. The questions to keep in mind are numerous and complex: why do people think that they have a right to engage in atrocities? How does a person become able to kill unarmed individuals? Are the concepts of individual responsibility and accountability meaningful and realistic within the reality of officially authorized slaughter? And how can we structure society in a way that reduces the possibility of mass murder?

Before considering these questions in more detail, let us take a closer look at the cases of Nanking and My Lai and discover what they have in common.

1. Two Case Studies: Nanking and My Lai

On December 13, 1937, the ancient Chinese capital of Nanking fell to the Japanese. As the victorious army entered the city, it marked the beginning of one of the worst massacres in history, claiming the lives of between 260,000 and 400,000 people. In less than seven weeks, more people died in Nanking than in the nuclear bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki combined.

The atrocities committed within the walled city are almost beyond the imagination of civilized people. The Japanese soldiers would gather together hundreds of Chinese for mass executions. When this procedure became tedious, the executions would occasionally turn into killing contests, for example by attempting to be the first to decapitate one hundred victims. Sexual violence was rampant as the soldiers gang raped girls and women of all ages, kidnapped women into organized sexual slavery, and forced family members to rape each other in front of relatives. The Chinese died from bludgeoning and from wounds caused by fire; they froze to death in the Yangtze river or were used as subjects in medical experiments and as targets for bayonet practice. Soon bodies littered the streets of Nanking (Chang, 1997).

This massacre was not a spontaneous outburst of Japanese rage against the Chinese, nor was it the result of a temporary lapse in military discipline. It was instead a seven-week ordeal, authorized by the military leadership and systematically carried out by thousands of perpetrators. All Chinese suspected of being ex-soldiers were murdered, as were thousands upon thousands of innocent civilians. As the Nazis soon would in Europe, the Japanese relied heavily on deception in order to keep their victims ignorant of their upcoming fate until it was too late to resist. Often the condemned dug their own graves before being killed; the truly unfortunate were buried alive.

Three decades later, in neighboring Vietnam, Charlie Company of the US Army's Americal Division would arrive in the small village of My Lai. On March 16, 1968 they would slaughter its inhabitants and burn their houses. Some of the men would also rape their victims before killing them, and some would take their scalps. One individual was beheaded, and a woman died from a round of fire from a gun rammed up her vagina. Within four hours, between four and five hundred unarmed women, children, and men lost their lives. Then the soldiers sat down and ate lunch (Bilton and Sim, 1992).

1.1 Two Versions of the Events

Two distinctly different narratives emerged from the testimony of those who were in My Lai, that day in 1968. One of these has a highly psychological flavor. It goes like this: an inexperienced and untested company is sent into an area (Quang Ngai province) that has been a Viet Cong stronghold for months. Here they face sniper fire, booby traps, and death – but no combat. Feeling frustrated, fearful, and angry about the loss of comrades, they are chosen for an important mission that is aimed at eliminating an important hamlet of VC support. The evening before the attack, they are briefed in a way that leaves little doubt in their minds: they will finally see some real fighting. The targeted village is to be considered a war zone, where everyone is a potential enemy. In the morning of March 16, they go in firing – and receive no enemy fire in return. Venting their anger, frustration, and fear on the Vietnamese they have come to despise, or at least confuse with the enemy, they butcher them all as a result of a »collective psychological breakdown« (Beidler, 2006, p. 3).

This first story of My Lai avoids any direct questions of command responsibility. The colonels and major generals only authorized the attack, but did not order a massacre. They might have been ignorant of the conditions on the ground, and once the realities of the situation became clear, they had no way of controlling it. Direct command responsibility extends no further than Lieutenant William Calley, the officer in charge of the soldiers at My Lai, who ordered and oversaw the killings while simultaneously murdering several people himself.

In the second version of the massacre, however, the commanders are the real reason behind it. According to this story, the ambitious Division Commander, Major General Koster, realizes that he has been given the opportunity to succeed at a task where others have failed before him: to eradicate the Viet Cong domination in the Quang Ngai province. But to his consternation, one of the brigades is making no progress because of massive numbers of VC sympathizers in a strategically important area, which will become known to the world as »My Lai.«

In order to get rid of this problem, he puts together a task force of inexperienced men with a reputation for dubious body counts, led by a Lt.-Col. Frank A. Barker, who seems to have imbued his unit with the attitude of fairly indiscriminate killing. Koster flies in the day before the assault, briefs the officers, and leaves, having made it clear that the village is swarming with enemies and enemy sympathizers, and is to be destroyed. He then proceeds to ignore all radio communications during the massacre and finally initiates an ensuing »investigation« that rapidly turns into an actual cover-up.

This version fits well with Calley's defense at his trial, where he argued that he had been given the mandate – even the duty – to obliterate the entire hamlet. According to him, his superiors made it clear that everyone and everything in My Lai was to be destroyed, even the animals.

In Nanking, the story is more clear-cut, but there is still an element of uncertainty that echoes the confusion over command responsibility at My Lai. To start at the top: what did the emperor really know? The question remains unanswered to this day, but much seems to indicate that he *must* have known, just like Koster must have known. And then there is the matter of the commanding officer, General Matsui Iwane, who grew feverishly ill just before the defeat of Nanking, leaving command of the army to the emperor's uncle. From his sickbed, he insisted that the auxiliary military police must prevent unlawful conduct, and Matsui appears to have been genuinely shocked and saddened by what he saw once he entered Nanking. But except for Matsui (who seems to have been a thorn in the side of the Japanese military leadership, rather than an example of its benign intentions), the massacre was planned and executed according to orders and in full view of the commanding officers.

If we return to My Lai again, it is clear that the division of explanations into »bottom-up« and »top-down« narratives is unsatisfactory. As Philip Beidler points out, both of these perspectives leave the face-to-face killers with little or no responsibility. The first emphasizes the »psychological« hypothesis, denying much command responsibility and arguing that something like this was bound to happen. It was just a result of the war, and no one is really to blame (except for maybe the President and General Westmoreland). The second explanation places the blame heavily on the commanders. In both cases, the »butchering mob« is vested with the »status of hapless pawns, scapegoats, even victims« (Beidler, 2006, p. 6).

My approach will try to avoid these two explanatory extremes. I believe that both versions hold some truth and that they also both represent gross simplifications. A compromise must be reached, where we fully appreciate the responsibility of the commanders, the role of the war context, the power of the social forces, as well as the part played by individual killers. Unfortunately, all explanations of complex phenomena are inevitably simplifications. The challenge is to achieve strong explanatory power while keeping the number of intellectual short-cuts at a minimum. I believe a good perspective to take in this pursuit is the socio-psychological one. Through this theoretical filter, we might be able to perceive both the individual and the system; the interplay between them and the responsibility shared by them.

2. Discarding Individual Explanations of Mass Murder: Justifying the Socio-Psychological Approach

It seems clear that human beings have not been designed to commit mass murder. Becoming a killer consists of crossing a moral boundary or overcoming psychological obstacles, rather than fulfilling a biological destiny.

Unfortunately, too many of us will readily cross this line, and that is what we desperately need to understand and prevent.

The idea of the individual person as the causal agent of mass murder should be resisted. Soldiers in the field are merely the people at the end of the line; the ones pulling the trigger. Yet – for obvious reasons – the notion of the killer as the fundamental agent of his violent acts lives on. Typically, contemporary views on the individual perpetrator's psychology may be roughly divided into two categories: that is, the killers are either »*peculiar*« people (motivated by ideology, hatred, sadistic tendencies, etc.) or essentially »*ordinary*« individuals (representing the societal beliefs of their times; subjected to conformist pressures and a coercive authority; faceless bureaucrats; or materialist egocentrics).

Despite their refined facades, such prevailing dichotomies are obstructive to any adequate psychological explanation of organized mass murder. Reality is more complex, more confusing, and less conceptually clean. As Hilberg writes of the Nazi perpetrators, the »men who performed the destructive work varied not only in their backgrounds but also in their psychological attributes« (1992, p. 51). The motives differ significantly even among the highly motivated killers.

Clearly, many leaders and low-level perpetrators *are* ideologically committed. But this does not overshadow the fact that most people base their contributions to mass murder on more mixed and diffuse motivations. The potential killers pervade society; they inhabit all social levels and come from all types of professions (Mann, 2000). It is thus fairly superfluous to describe these individuals in terms of their personalities or mentalities, because these descriptions fail to delineate who the killers are actually likely to be.

The question for the social psychologist is instead: what social conditions make normal people capable of planning, ordering, or committing acts of mass violence? In other words, what forces strip the individual of those restraints that Iris Chang described as the exceedingly thin »veneer of civilization?« (Chang, 1997, p. 55).

3. Reducing Moral Restraints on Violence

The issue of moral disengagement (Bandura,1999) – that is, the removal or significant reduction of moral restraints on murderous behavior – is central to any comprehensive understanding of systematic mass murder. This process is highly contextual, and depends in large part on organizational structure. In the case of military massacre, such structure is provided by the military organization. This is an intensely hierarchical system, where the top leadership and the commanding officers provide the most obvious sources

of moral authority for the soldiers in the field. Orders are meant to be obeyed at all times – that, if anything, is the fundamental moral imperative.

Beyond its focus on loyalty, the organization also indoctrinates the soldiers to accept force as a valid means of obtaining the defined objectives. It is, so to speak, a subculture of violence which familiarizes the soldiers with their military capabilities and obligations, reducing their sense of responsibility, increasing their sense of duty, and weakening the ability to resist orders. A context of brutality is created, where killing is made to seem »part of the drill.«

Furthermore, the military system efficiently dehumanizes its designated victims, so that they are seen as »the enemy« rather than as individual people. The impact of this dehumanization may lead to a total contempt for the targeted individuals, allowing any behavior directed at them to be exempted from moral evaluation. Then war provides the arena in which all these elements may be expressed.

As the training kicks in and the spiral of violence gains momentum, the brutalized soldiers may occasionally lose their psychological balance and descend into so-called »battlefield frenzy,« where the awesome power they wield takes hold of them and combines with their dehumanized view of their victims to allow the worst atrocities imaginable. I'll now deal with all of these processes in more detail.

3.1 A Context of Perceived Legitimacy: Authorizing Violence

People in authority often have the ability to generate some sense of a transcendent mission. To Himmler and Hitler, this mission consisted of purifying the Arian Race and thus saving the German nation; for American policy makers in Vietnam, the intention was to halt Communism and ultimately save the world from totalitarianism; and for the Japanese, it was the pursuit of glory, territorial expansion, and national survival that provided the perpetrators with a greater sense of purpose.

Our evaluation of Lt. Calley as a moral human being may be influenced by at least two factors. Firstly, did he actually receive the alleged orders to carry out the massacre at My Lai? And secondly, does this in any way affect his personal responsibility for the atrocities? Did he actually believe that he had no choice in the matter, and more crucially: that his behavior was legitimate?

To answer these questions, we need to know what we actually mean by a »legitimate« act, as opposed to an illegitimate or illegal – and ultimately immoral – act? Who decides which acts are legitimate? If we examine the response of the American people to the Calley case, it seems that a large number of Americans would say that if an order has been issued by a higher-ranking military commander, then Calley's actions are legitimated and thus he is vindicated as a moral person (Kelman, 1973). On this view, being under orders absolves him of the responsibility. Erich Naumann, commander

of Einsatzgruppe B in Byelorussia during World War II, insisted that this absolution also has psychological reverberations. While defending himself in court, he said that he could only feel guilt and remorse for crimes he had *personally* committed. He elaborated thus: »If I myself have carried out killings and cruelties then I would have to feel guilt and remorse. If I have carried out an order then I have no guilt at all, and therefore I cannot feel remorse for a guilt that does not exist« (Rhodes, 2002, p. 222).

The Nuremberg verdict (and subsequent international legislation) does not accept this argument, of course, but it remains a troubling psychological fact that obedience to authority often leads people to commit atrocities, both out of respect for superiors and out of a sense of justification and legitimacy. Milgram's famous studies at Yale bear out this point (Milgram, 1974).

Even if we don't accept the absolving effect of superior orders, most people would perceive a difference between authorized massacres and self-generated atrocities. As Lt. Calley moves into My Lai with his company, it seems to make some difference that they are carrying out a sanctioned operation rather than completely losing their minds and butchering hundreds of civilians in a spontaneous outburst of fury. But what could have made him believe that he had the right to kill all those people without bringing any grave consequences onto himself or his troops? The most obvious argument is that the events at My Lai were no freak accident, but a natural result of the US policy of »search and destroy« and of the army's focus on »body count« as a prominent measure of military success. Indeed, stories from Vietnam include those of high-ranking officers going »gook hunting« in their helicopters, and it is a horrific fact that at least one million South Vietnamese civilians lost their lives in the whole war – at the rate of 100.000 per year (Beidler, 2006). In addition to these somewhat ameliorating facts, there is now general agreement that Captain Medina – Calley's immediate superior –gave the firm impression that everyone in the vicinity of My Lai should be killed.

Calley was not a special type of monster. Instead, he was a rather average individual who failed to see that his orders were illegitimate and who, in the end, lacked the courage or will to refuse them. He was swept away by the general atmosphere of the war and the climate of the military organization to which he belonged. Having been trained to kill and taught to despise the Vietnamese, the situation presenting itself at My Lai was a chance to take action against these despicable people and increase the »body count« of his company.

3.2 The Organizational Structure of the Military: Desensitization and Indoctrination

Calley's military training must be said to pale in comparison to the Japanese army's treatment of fresh recruits. Obedience to authority permeated all of Japanese society in the 1930s, but in the army this ideal assumed a terrify-

ing intensity. Some recruits died under the brutal conditions of their intense training and most of those who prevailed were shaped into pawns of the military leadership; »tempered vessels into which the military could pour a new set of life goals« (Chang, 1997, p. 32).

These new life goals consisted of becoming a cog in the large and powerful machine that was Japan, and to work blindly towards providing this magnificent nation with more living space beyond its present borders. Grimly resembling Nazi ideology, the Japanese were told that they were the master race of Asia and that the only way for Japan to survive was through expansion.

As the war unfolded and the Japanese took prisoners, the military leaders consciously used these prisoners as target practice for the young recruits. This served to desensitize the soldiers to the violence they themselves were expected to wield. A Japanese soldier remembers his commander telling him one day that: »You have never killed anyone yet, so today we shall have some killing practice. You must not consider the Chinese as a human being, but only as something of rather less value than a dog or cat. Be brave!« (Chang, 1997, p. 56). Another soldier, named Tominaga Shozo, was taught how to decapitate prisoners as part of his officer training. When his instructor cut off the head of a helpless Chinese prisoner, Tominaga described the scene as so appalling that he felt he couldn't breathe. Horror was the natural response of new recruits, but soon the atrocities became routine, almost banal. Looking back years later, he estimated that »Everyone became a demon within three months« (p. 58).

An especially important element of military training emerges very clearly from these procedures: the attempt to dehumanize the victims. This dehumanization further desensitizes the soldiers to their murderous tasks ahead and thus aids the process of creating operational killers. Hatred and contempt for the Chinese or Vietnamese certainly facilitate massacre, but emotions like hatred are rather fickle and unreliable. Sustained campaigns of mass murder such as the one in Nanking are therefore greatly enhanced by the dehumanization of the victims. As Moshman writes, »[h]atred makes it possible to kill those we see as persons. Dehumanization makes it possible to kill without hating« (Moshman, 2005, p. 194).

3.3 Killing the Other: Dehumanization

Mutual respect is the antithesis to systematic mass murder. You can hardly seek to eliminate *en masse* those you respect. Instead, as Leo Kuper writes, mass slaughter is »the denial of a common humanity« (Kuper, 1981, p. 188), separating the »I« from the »Other,« debasing the victims and stripping them of their human qualities. As a result, the interpersonal contact that is the foundation for empathy and respect is shattered, facilitating the slaughter of people who would otherwise be viewed as harmless human beings worthy of consideration. As a young, Ukrainian Jewess wrote in her

diary in 1941: »They don't consider us people; we're doomed« (Rhodes, 2002, p. 188).

The importance of dehumanization within the process of exterminatory mass murder has sometimes been called into question as a »liberal assumption« (Kuper, 1985, p. 196); a theoretical mishap resulting from the moral bias of benign intellectuals. According to this argument, the sadistic behavior displayed by the perpetrators in places such as Nanking and My Lai is supposed to reveal an awareness of the victims' humanity in the killers' minds, evident in the conscious defilement of their *human* dignity (Dutton et al., 2004). But this objection assumes that dehumanization is absolute and *in*humanizing, where in reality it is relative: »They« may still be human, only *less so* than »Us.« A Japanese veteran reflected thus on one of his crimes: »Perhaps when we were raping her, we thought of her as a woman, but when we killed her, we just thought of her as something like a pig« (Chang, 1997, p. 50). This is what »denial of common humanity« truly means, and it certainly permeates the military systems that resort to the mass slaughter of innocent civilians. It is ideological, bureaucratic, and physical, designating the victims as an inferior class of beings and as a threat that can or should be disposed of.

When Serbs called the murder of civilians »ethnic cleansing« and when medical personnel in the Nazi concentration camps referred to forced sterilization and gassing as »medical matters,« they obscured the nature of their actions, and instead transformed murder into a sequence of pragmatic problems. Similarly, US mass murder of civilians in Vietnam was treated merely as a matter of strategy.

As a physical process, dehumanization begins with the forced removal of personal individuality, and ends with the near-total destruction of human dignity. The victim is no longer an individual; instead *it* is part of a homogenous mass of inferior beings. This allows the perpetrators to define their actions as something less than ordinary murder, a view freed from the subsequent moral considerations associated with such behavior. The details of this process can be discerned in the elaborate efforts made by the Nazis in order to reduce the individuality and humane characteristics of their victims. Primo Levi, a prominent survivor of Auschwitz, describes how this attempt unfolded:

> *Nothing belongs to us any more; they have taken away our clothes, our shoes, even our hair; if we speak, they will not listen to us, and if they listen, they will not understand. They will even take away our name: and if we want to keep it, we will have to find ourselves the strength to do so, to manage somehow so that behind the name something of us, of us as we were, still remains […] for he who loses all often easily loses himself. He will be a man whose life and death can be lightly decided*

> *with no sense of human affinity, in the most fortunate of cases, on the basis of a pure judgement of utility* (Levi, 1958, p. 27).

No effort is made to reduce the suffering of the victims. Instead, extreme brutality is enforced as policy. When the commandant of Treblinka was asked why the victims – even those already designated for the gas chambers – were treated in the brutal manner they were, he correspondingly replied that it was done in order to make the job easier for those who actually had to carry out the final orders (Sereny, 1983). The system worked: shaven, beaten, and starving, the victims looked terrible, and in their desperation, they behaved like animals, fighting over dry pieces of bread or a sip of water. Compare this effect to the following description of the Chinese by a Japanese commander in Nanking:

> *They all walked like droves, like ants crawling on the ground. They looked like a bunch of homeless people, with ignorant expressions on their faces.*
>
> *A herd of ignorant sheep […] It felt quite foolish to think we had been fighting to the death against these ignorant slaves* (Chang, 1997, p. 44).

The victims' plight has reduced them to mere ghosts of their previous humanity. In the eyes of the perpetrators, they thus assume the appearance of despicable creatures, conforming to the existing stereotypes the killers have been supplied with. Through dehumanization, the *internal* imagery of the »Other« has been made into an *external* reality. Psychologically, murdering them becomes infinitely easier.

3.4 The Impact of Dehumanization: »Battlefield Frenzy« and Sadistic Behavior

Disturbing research has shown that dehumanization not only facilitates mass murder and self-absolving justifications, but also that it may lead to an actual *increase* in aggression (Bandura et al., 1975). This fact seems to indicate a possible explanation for perhaps the most puzzling elements of military massacres: so-called »battlefield frenzy« and the widespread sadistic behavior referred to earlier. For if most of the perpetrators are initially normal human beings, how can such a large proportion of them turn into these vicious killers, rapists, and torturers? It is one thing to kill under orders; another to forcefully rape a pregnant woman, before cutting out her unborn fetus and squashing it in your hand, as was done several times in Nanking.

Pictures of smiling and laughing executioners are common among the documents depicting the massacres of history. According to a Nazi police official in Poland, the members of his unit were »quite happy to take part

in shootings of Jews. They had a ball!« (Klee et al., 1988, p. 76). Similarly, many of the Japanese perpetrators that became killers and rapists in Nanking show no remorse, even to this day. Nakatomi Hakudo, for example, remembers »smiling proudly« as he »took his [commanding officer's] sword and began killing people« (Chang, 1997, p. 59).

On the surface, the phenomenon of battlefield frenzy looks a lot like the brutality and sadism of these stories. But psychologically it is not, as Vernado Simpson's behavior at My Lai clearly indicates. When this soldier was asked why he killed twenty-five people that March morning in 1968, and why he not only shot them, but also cut their throats, scalped them, cut off their hands, and tore out their tongues, he simply answered: »I just killed. Once I started, the […] training, the whole programming part of killing, it just came out…The hardest – the part that's hard is to kill, but once you kill, that becomes easier, to kill the next person and the next one and the next one. Because I had no feelings or no emotions or no nothing. No direction. I just killed. It can happen to anyone« (Bilton and Sim, 1992, p. 7).

Here we see the awesome power of desensitization once again, as it propels the perpetrators towards worse and worse atrocities. In Nanking, the soldiers would become so accustomed to killing that they grew bored of it. The killing games and various tortures often took place as a way of fighting the monotony of mass murder. And as the moral ground completely collapses and falls away under the soldiers' feet, their contempt for the victims takes on new dimensions and allow the worst acts imaginable. The context of mass slaughter has thus created monsters out of people who would otherwise have led normal and well-adapted lives within the confines of civilized society.

Where many perpetrators appear remorseless, Vernado Simpson, on the other hand, is traumatized by his experiences. According to him, he temporarily lost his mind, and he has been punished for his sins ever since – as when his child became a victim of a random shooting. This sense of »losing one's mind« is not unusual in the extreme situations of military massacres. In Eastern Europe, well-trained SS killers often broke down and cried or vomited. Some even started shooting other German soldiers or committed suicide. These breakdowns soon became so numerous that by November 1941 Himmler had established several mental hospitals to take care of these »psychological casualties« (Rhodes, 2002, p. 227). Even the commanders occasionally broke down, and one of them – Arthur Neber, characterized back in Berlin as »a mere shadow of his former self« (p. 225) – later became implicated in the plot to kill Hitler. There is a stark symbolism in Nebe's story, who was executed by his own organization (the SS) for having attempted to murder the ultimate source of his previous behavior.

The authoritarian and violent context of military action can simply become too much to bear for the killers. At My Lai, it totally overwhelmed Vernado Simpson, who did not have the capacity to retain his moral sense

of right and wrong at the critical moment. But a crucial fact remains: that some did. In the midst of the slaughter, a pilot named Hugh Thomson even landed his helicopter and told his men to shoot any American soldier who attempted to kill civilians. He then went on to save some of the Vietnamese, flying them to safety. And this is what the laws of war require soldiers to do. I want to conclude my argument by considering the realism and fairness of this expectation, and by suggesting ways to reduce the chance of future atrocities.

4. Conclusion: Questions of Individual Responsibility and the Prevention of Organized Mass Murder of Civilians

My argument has several conclusions. One: it is terribly difficult for individuals who have been militarily trained and indoctrinated to refuse an illegitimate order on the battlefield. Two: it is not through the legal prosecution of individual, low-level perpetrators that we can hope to prevent future incidents of organized mass murder. Three: it is none-the-less important that we do prosecute them, but for other reasons than deterrence. And four: the crucial means of preventing such atrocities consist of changing the social structures and cultural precepts that have shown themselves so conductive to mass murder. I'll now proceed to deal with these points in turn.

First of all, evidence from both historical and psychological research suggests that the majority of a normal human population is capable of becoming obedient participants in destructive campaigns of some sort (e.g., Milgram, 1974; Browning, 1992). Clearly, it is difficult to resist the social forces that are directed at the individual within the context of military massacre. It can be dangerous to disobey, or it can be hard to perceive that disobedience is an option at all, especially if the soldiers don't even know about the concept of illegal orders. Hodges, for example – the drill sergeant of Charlie Company – remembers nothing in his training about the possibility of illegal orders. And when Calley was asked during his trial »whether he ever felt the need to discriminate between legal and illegal orders,« he replied that he »had never been told he had the choice« (Bilton and Sim, 1992, p. 53). This defense gains some credibility when we consider the fact that Charlie Company was only given a one-hour briefing on the Geneva Conventions. Hundreds of hours of training were aimed at teaching the soldiers how to kill the enemy. Then several weeks were spent nervously in the jungles of Vietnam. And only one hour was dedicated to the laws of war. How could that one hour in any way moderate the cumulative effects of all the other training?

This problem is directly concerned with the second conclusion of my argument. For if the soldiers barely even know about the laws of war, whose fault is that? And how can it be remedied by prosecuting the face-to-face

killers? Of course the answer to the first question is that the leadership is ultimately to blame for the soldiers' ignorance. And the military reason is obvious, since it is counterproductive from a commander's point of view to have soldiers questioning their orders and considering the legality of their instructions. Knowledge of the Geneva and Hague Conventions does not in any significant way contribute to the objective of the mission, so why spend time on it?

This state of ignorance is not changed dramatically by prosecuting the killers. Once on trial, their actions are behind them. And as deterrence, such trials are inefficient. Most killers usually feel immune from prosecution during the perpetration of their crimes, as they perceive their actions to be legitimated by the state. And in truth, most perpetrators of mass atrocities escape prosecution. There are simply too many of them.

Still it is important that even the low-level perpetrators are held accountable for their actions and to prosecute as many of them as possible. Where such prosecution fails as deterrence, it triumphs as societal moral self-protection and as a tool in attempts to achieve closure for the survivors. The law can clearly serve as a post-atrocity way of maintaining our moral sanity as a society and as a means of obtaining a sense of justice for the victims and the survivors. And, as was stated above, it remains a fact that some people refuse to carry out orders; a fact that provides the basis for accountability. We do indeed have free will, even in the worst of circumstances. In the words of Michael Walzer, the »examples of refusal, delay, doubt, and anguish at My Lai« represent the »internal confirmations of our external judgments« (Walzer, 1977, p. 311).

But the possibility of organized mass murder will not be significantly reduced until the actual leaders are put on trial. In the past they have often managed to avoid justice. The Japanese emperor, Hirohito, faced no severe consequences for his mysterious part in the Nanking massacre, nor did any of the high-ranking officers who were indicted after My Lai. Calley received a lenient sentence and was later pardoned by President Nixon himself. In today's world, Donald Rumsfeld is still a free man, even though horrible acts have been committed under his leadership and some low-level perpetrators punished. The powerful are afraid of a domino effect, where one trial may produce compromising testimony that could destabilize or topple even heads of state. And it is here that international law has a far greater purpose to fulfill than that of prosecuting the low-level perpetrators.

It is a purpose that has only recently begun to emerge as potentially realistic. Sovereignty, as a universal guiding principle of international relations, is about to crumble. Leaders of nations are losing their immunity and can no longer always rely on their borders to protect them. Previously, the fundamental problem has resided in the fact that leaders have been free to create a Machiavellian climate in which atrocities become accepted as means to an end, either explicitly or implicitly. Such is the ultimate consequence

of the doctrine of *raison d'état*, according to which the state is free of the moral constraints that regulate individual interaction. For who is the state? Traditionally, the leaders that govern the state have been viewed as mere representatives of the state they serve, and thus they too are free of the moral constraints. It follows logically from this that all individuals who are acting under the authority of the state can justify their behavior, even when it is atrocious.

It is this organizational atmosphere that must be changed if we are to reduce the possibility of future atrocities. This might be accomplished in several ways. One move could be aimed at greater transparency, even in matters of national security, together with the introduction of more checks and balances. The problem with the military is that its structure is so hierarchical and its actions hidden from scrutiny. Things are allowed to simmer in the dark, and only occasionally do they explode into the international consciousness, like My Lai did more than thirty years ago.

The typical counterargument to this is that the military needs to be strictly hierarchical in order to function effectively in the case of combat. And furthermore, that it depends on secrecy. But even if we grant this, we still haven't run out of options. The next idea would be to impose a new ethic on the military and on society in general. Soldiers should be taught how to display more civil courage and told that some moral principles overrule *all others*. These would include a concept of universal human value, but they would not include unquestioned obedience to authority. Loyalty must be less instinctive than human empathy; dehumanization must be replaced by personalization, making it more difficult to obscure the individual dimension of mass murder. The smoke rising from the chimneys of Birkenau or a pile of corpses stacked up in the jungle are horrific images, but they are not human ones. They do not adequately reflect the suffering behind their creation; they are dehumanized icons. We must *perceive* the other individual in order to feel empathy with that person, and it is exactly when such perceptions are obscured, avoided, or denied that the »individual disappears« (Suedfeld, 2000, p. 4) and mass slaughter becomes a psychological possibility.

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